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Author(s)	Rosen, Alan
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Hearn and the City

Part I: Europe and America

Alan ROSEN

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Although Lafcadio Hearn was born on the small Grecian isle of Santa Maura in the even smaller town of Levkas, he lived much of his life in large cities. The first such city he inhabited was Dublin where he moved with his mother in 1854 when he was barely four years old. Though he spent his formative years there, he left no record of his impressions of the city, perhaps because he was still so young. He next lived briefly in London, the world's largest city at the time, before moving to the United States and taking up residence first in New York City from 1869 to 1871 and then in the thriving mid-western city of Cincinnati, Ohio from 1871 to 1877. After that, he lived for about nine years in New Orleans, Louisiana, and nearly two years in Saint-Pierre, Martinique, before moving to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he lived for only five months at the home of Dr. George Gould. A few weeks were again spent in New York City before Hearn left the United States for Japan. There he stayed first in the Tokyo/Yokohama area until he could secure a teaching job in the remote and much smaller city of Matsue. Then, after a little more than a year there, he moved to the somewhat larger, southern city of Kumamoto where he stayed for nearly three years. Next he lived in Kobe for just over one year before moving to Tokyo in 1896 where he stayed until his death in 1904.

Such a long list of cities large, middle-sized, and small might lead one to conclude that Hearn was naturally fond of urban life. He was not. With few exceptions, he grew to dislike every sizeable city he ever lived in. In fact, it could almost be said that the more populated the city, the less Hearn liked it. For New York and Tokyo he reserved a special loathing, but he hated them for different reasons. For Philadelphia and Matsue he had mostly praise, but again he liked them for different reasons. New Orleans he liked at first for its color and passion but then grew tired of it; Kumamoto he hated at first for its militia and modernity but then grew fonder of it. But whatever city he was in, its weather and customs and unique atmosphere affected, sometimes deeply, Hearn's mood and the content of his writing. In this paper, I would like to analyze Hearn's comments on some of the cities he lived in to gain greater insight into the writer and the man.

Before we look into Hearn's comments on the main cities he lived in before moving to Japan, it may be useful to have in mind an idea of the populations of those cities at around the time Hearn was there. Dublin's population in 1851 was about 260,000,¹ and London's in the 1860s was, according to Hearn, around four million, arguably the largest city in the world. While Hearn was living in the United States, the population of most major cities was rapidly growing, but even greater New York (i.e. the cities of New York and Brooklyn) could not match London for number of people. The following chart gives the population and ranking of the major cities Hearn lived in during his residence in the United States from the late 1860s to the late 1880s.² Bold figures indicate the population at around the time Hearn was living or visiting there. Brooklyn was not yet officially part of New York, but it would have been part of Hearn's impressions, so I have included it:

	Population					
	1870	(US rank)	1880	(US rank)	1890	(US rank)
New York	942,292	(1)	1,206,299	(1)	1,515,301	(1)
Brooklyn	396,099	(3)	566,663	(3)	806,343	(4)
Philadelphia	674,022	(2)	847,170	(2)	1,046,964	(3)
Cincinnati	216,239	(8)	255,139	(8)	296,908	(9)
New Orleans	191,418	(9)	216,090	(10)	242,039	(12)

We can see that Hearn's move from New York to Cincinnati was to a city less than one-fifth as populous, but that the move from Cincinnati to New Orleans entailed virtually no change in the city size. Then from Saint-Pierre, Martinique, whose population was about 26,000 when Hearn lived there in 1888 and 1889, he moved to Philadelphia, a city fifty times as large but still far less overwhelming to him than New York was at that time: since 1869 when he had first lived in New York, its population had nearly doubled to well over two million, more than double that of Philadelphia. In the following examination of Hearn's comments on these and other cities, I hope to clarify to what degree, if any, Hearn's fondness or dislike for a city was influenced by size, climate, or other factors.

To Hearn, the city, especially the large ones, seemed like the repository of everything that was modern, and the modern to Hearn was by and large ugly, noxious, and inhuman. Northern cities with cold winters were especially anathema to him. When invited to New York by H.E. Krehbiel, Hearn in New Orleans replied: "B-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r! 'Tis winter. My lizard blood freezes at the thought. In my room it is 71° : that is cold for us. New York in winter signifieth for such as me — Dissolution — eternal darkness and worms. Transformation of the physical and vital forces of L.H. into the forces of innumerable myriads of worms!"³ The only thing that could make life there bearable was money, enough of it to shield one from the worst effects of its physical and mental indignities. Hearn had known life without money in London and New York, and those experiences were to remain among the most fearful in his memory:

Dear Mason, — . . . I have just read that most frightful book by Kipling, "The Light that Failed," where he speaks of the horror of being in London without money. Nobody can even dimly imagine — no, not with a forty horse-power imagination — what the horror is, if he hasn't been there. And I have — in London, Cincinnati, New York, Memphis, New Orleans, Savannah — not to speak of other places. Repeated experiences make it worse: you can never get used to it. I would not return to a great-civilized city again without money to save my life from a tiger. Hell is realized there. No: if ever I have to leave Japan, I shall sail straight south into some old tropical port; — any crumbling Spanish town, any village of half-naked savages, any imaginable land of cannibals and pagans, where the winter is not, is a million times better to live in than a world's capital without money. "What a fool I was not to go and live among savages when I was nineteen years old," was my first thought when I passed my first week in a West Indian cabin in a mountain district. Money! (XVI, 314-15; undated but comes just after a letter dated Nov. 1, 1892 from Kumamoto)

Living in a large city without money was not life at all; it was "hell," a "horror," worse than being devoured by a tiger. Even savages were more humane and hospitable, Hearn implies, and the fear of cold in winter was not to be taken lightly. In a tropical climate one can survive, at least for a while, without money, since the need for lodging, heat, or warm clothes is minimal. In a large, northern city, however, the poor live in nearly constant fear of the very real possibility of freezing to death in winter. Only a steady supply of money could buy immunity from extreme physical discomfort, and that fact itself produced in Hearn extreme mental discomfort.

As with many writers, the appearance of cities was often grist for Hearn's descriptive mill. In an early piece for the *Daily City Item* of June 27, 1878, Hearn described London as he remembered it: a generally dark place which he summed up with the word "dreariness," including a certain "architectural dreariness," contributing to a general mood he described as "vast gloom." Its color scheme, as he painted it, was "grimy grey" with "lithographic tones." Size and complexity were also impressive features: "enormous labyrinths of streets . . . huge systems of docks and subterranean railroads and viaducts" along with "interminable channels of streets." Even pronouncing the name London produced "an echo of ponderous immensity." With a population of close to four million at the time Hearn was there, London in its entirety was generally felt to be unknowable by any one human being; even a cab driver that had been driving in London for thirty years confessed to Hearn, "I don't know London yet." (Later, Hearn would observe his own inability to understand Japan, even after several years of residence, quoting Rudyard Kipling on the impossibility of any sailor ever really knowing the Java currents.) All of these aspects, gloom, enormity, complexity, and mystery, coupled with the thunderous "Roar" of London heard daily, suggested to him images of fantastic beasts, sinister and mesmerizing:

Then when the stars come out, if you wander to the Embankment through a million of lights, you may behold a spectacle unapproached in sublimity by any other city of the earth—the black river moaning between its banks of stone; the great masses of Westminster spires looming up in the night; the bridges spanning the stream with their arches of illuminations; the phosphoric face of the great clock two hundred feet above you; the granite visage of the grim river gods frowning from the corbels of the steamboat piers; and, at intervals, the flame-eyed engines roaring by, like monsters, dragging after them their long vertebrae of cars.

Yet, despite his aversion to London's depressive aspects, Hearn was clearly awed, if not fascinated, by its power and sublimity, and he was enchanted by what he called "the full romance of its vastness and its gloom." When he lived there, he was a frightened, impoverished boy still in his teens, and once he left it, he would never visit the great city again. But he still felt its pull nearly thirty years later from as far away as Japan:

But what cities do city-haters hate? Venice, Florence, Milan, Rome, Genoa? —Seville, Granada, Cadiz, Alcantara? —Marseilles, Paris, Rouen? —No— but Liverpool, Manchester, London; New York, Chicago, Boston. I believe Wordsworth found London beautiful. What London really is seems to me to have been exactly felt only by Dore. (You know his "London" which the English did not like at all.) And I say this even while wishing to be in London again, like [Kipling's fictional character] Private Ortheris —"for the sights of 'er and the smells of 'er"— "orange-peel and hasphalte and gas coming in over Vauxhall bridge." (XVI, 136. To Chamberlain, 1894)

From London, Hearn crossed the Atlantic Ocean only to face some rather similar horrors in New York City. Manhattan alone had over 942,000 residents in 1870, and neighboring Brooklyn city nearly 400,000.⁴ Once again in a huge northern metropolis without money, it is no wonder that Hearn also found in New York the stuff of life-long nightmares. He wrote little about his first two years living there, except to recall that it was generally hellish: "New York is a horrible nightmare to me," he wrote to Krehbiel from New Orleans in 1887. But the imagery he used to express those nightmarish aspects was different from that he used for London.

If London was *dreary*, New York was *crazy*. It reminded him of a huge machine inside of which he was not only trapped but also buffeted around helplessly; it thwarted his will. And this frustration with the city's physical inhospitality was compounded by his sensitivity to the gruff impersonality of some of its denizens. When he tried to visit Miss Bisland at her Manhattan apartment, he was cowered not only by the size and command of the imposing buildings but also by their counterpart in human form, the apartment house's doorman:

Dear Miss Bisland, —A small creature rang the bell at 136 Madison Avenue. A large and determined concierge responded, and the following converse ensued:

S.C. — "Miss Bisland?"

C. — "No, sir!" Used to live here. — Moved.

S.C. — "Do you know where — ?

C. — "No, sir."

S.C. — "None of her friends or relatives here, who could tell me?"

C. — "No!"

The sudden closing of the door here made a Period and a Finis.

Then I wandered away down a double row of magnificent things that seemed less buildings than petrifications —astonishments of loftiness and silent power— and wondered how Miss Elizabeth Bisland must have felt when she first trod these enormous pavements and beheld these colossal dreams of stone trying to touch the moon. And reaching my friend Krehbiel's house I made this brief record of my vain effort to meet the grey eyes of E.B. (XIV, 32-33, 1887)

To Hearn, who dreaded crowds and hated "unsympathetic characters," this visit had certainly been a daunting experience, even though he was now only a visitor to the city and no longer impoverished. The concierge's final, impatient "No!"

and the finality of the closing of the building's door constituted a double rejection that surely pained a sensitive man like Hearn.

Awed by the city's power, symbolized by its enormous stone edifices, not to mention its large and equally unyielding concierges, Hearn must have felt small indeed. Even in the 1880s, the architecture of Manhattan was beginning to assume a vertical scale that singled it out from other metropolises. To Bisland, he took care to describe these gigantic buildings in non-derogatory terms, calling them "astonishments of loftiness" and romanticizing them as "colossal dreams of stone trying to touch the moon." Not being able to find her had been only a "vain effort," a minor annoyance. But two years later, his frustration at failing to find another New York acquaintance, Joseph Tunison, caused him to vent his spleen in imagery that was far less flattering.

Dear Joe, —By the time this reaches you I shall have disappeared.

The moment I get into all this beastly machinery called "New York," I get caught in some belt and whirled around madly in all directions until I have no sense left. This city drives me crazy, or, if you prefer, crazier; and I have no peace of mind or rest of body till I get out of it. Nobody can find anybody, nothing seems to be anywhere, everything seems to be mathematics and geometry and enigmatics and riddles and confusion worse confounded: architecture and mechanics run mad. One has to live by intuition and move by steam. I think an earthquake might produce some improvement. The so-called improvements in civilization have apparently resulted in making it impossible to see, hear, or find anything out. You are improving yourselves out of the natural world. I want to get back among the monkeys and the parrots, under a violet sky among green peaks and an eternally lilac and lukewarm sea—where clothing is superfluous and reading too much of an exertion—where everybody sleeps fourteen hours out of the twenty-four. This is frightful, nightmarish, devilish! Civilization is a hideous thing. Blessed is savagery! Surely a palm two hundred feet high is a finer thing in the natural order than seventy times seven New Yorks. I came in by one door as you went out the other. Now there are cubic miles of cut granite and iron fury between us. I shall at once find a hackman to take me away. I am sorry not to see you —but since you live in hell what can I do? I will try to find you again this summer. (XIV, 70-71. To Joseph Tunison, 1889)

The sense of awe and sublimity permeating his message to Bisland has clearly been supplanted by feelings of confusion and continuous torment. Instead of London's drab color, New York's description is characterized by violent motion that spins and bounces the helpless Lafcadio around like a steel ball in a pinball machine, driving him insane. The disorientation resulting from this being bandied about was what terrified him: one had no control over one's environment. This was a world based so purely on mathematics, geometry, and mechanics, that it defied human logic, appearing to him as enigmatic and chaotic. It was, in spite of itself, a maze, a riddle, a "frightful whirl and roar of modern improvements."⁵ Reason was useless in trying to navigate it; only intuition worked. Human leg power could not get you anywhere; only steam power worked. But what seemed to dishearten him the most was the loneliness, the missed human connections that the place seemed to generate. "Cubic miles of cut granite and iron fury" soon separated friends who had just missed meeting each other in this fast-paced, revolving door society. To Chamberlain he had expressed a longing for the sights and smells of London, however drab and foul. To Tunison, with Martinique and Saint Pierre still fresh in his memory, Hearn expressed a far deeper and more abiding longing for the colorful, natural, languorous life of the tropics.

To Mrs. Courtney back in relatively balmy New Orleans, Hearn described New York in September of 1887 by emphasizing four aspects: its noise, congestion, size, and cost. "Railroads are roaring overhead all the time . . . The place deafens me, stifles me, frightens me."⁶ London's noise was also called a roar, but so was that of New Orleans in Hearn's 1884 piece for the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* called "The Roar of a Great City."⁷ It was not the presence of these annoyances so much as their extremely high level that tried Hearn's soul. The degree of daily congestion in the streets was practically unknown in New Orleans, and Hearn must have enjoyed describing it to the little old lady back home: "the streets are blocked with wagons, horses, vehicles of a thousand kinds, —and the cram and jam of Broadway cars is something terrific." As for size, there were two aspects: (1) the city itself ("it takes you all morning to get to a place,

and all afternoon to get back”) and (2) the scale of the buildings (Hearn says he had to walk inside the post office for fully twenty minutes “as hard as [he] could . . . just to find the place to post a letter”). Along with great size went great costs: the rent for one of those large buildings, he wrote, ranged from \$500,000 to over \$1,000,000 a year. In New Orleans, a cup of coffee could still be had for five cents.

It was, however, a rather different attitude toward New York that Hearn described to another old friend, Henry Watkin in Cincinnati, just three months earlier in June of 1887. Instead of feeling overwhelmed and victimized, Hearn was enjoying the city, exhilarated by its energy and stimulated to write:

I am having one of the most delightful holidays here [New York] I ever had in my life; and I expect to stay a few weeks. If it were not for the terrible winters, I should like to live in New York. Some day I suppose I shall have to spend a good deal of my time here. The houses eleven stories high, that seem trying to climb into the moon, — the tremendous streets and roads, — the cascading thunder of the awful torrent of life, the sense of wealth-force and mind-power that oppresses the stranger here, — all these form so colossal a contrast with the inert and warmly colored Southern life that I know not how to express my impression. I can only think that I have found superb material for a future story, in which the influence of New York on a Southern mind may be described. (*Letters from The Raven*, p.85-86)

His joviality at this time was largely due to the efforts of his host, music critic H. E. Krehbiel, with whom he stayed at 438 West 57th Street. The “superb material” he thought he had found, however, never appeared in Hearn’s writings, and his enthusiasm for both the story idea and for life in New York gradually subsided. Years later, far away in Japan, Hearn suggested that only a native could really write well about life in New York.

While in Japan, Hearn sometimes longed to return, if only temporarily, to Western civilization, but he shrank from the thought of living again in any large city, especially New York. The main issue with that city, he wrote to Hendrick from Matsue, was not so much the quality of life, or the lack of it; it was the deadening effect he believed it would have on his writing:

If ever I must go to America, I hope I can keep out of New York. The great nightmare of it always dwells with me — moos at me in the night, especially in the time of earthquakes. Of London I should be much less afraid. But in such great cities I do not think a literary man can write any literature. Certainly not if he has to stay in the heart of the clockwork. Society withers him up — unless he have been born into the manner of it; and the complexities of the vast life about him he never could learn. Fancy a good romance about Wall Street — so written that the public could understand it! There is, of course, a tremendous romance there; but only a financier can really know the machinery, and his knowledge is technical. But what can the mere litterateur do, walled up to heaven in a world of mathematical mystery and machinery! (XIV, 292-93. To Hendrick, 1894)

Again Hearn disparages the city for being mathematical, mysterious, and mechanical, and for imprisoning him within high walls that stifled creativity, but his main complaint seems to be an imagined inability to comprehend urban society well enough to be able to write about it. He had already written extensively on the seamier side of life in Cincinnati, and perhaps that is why the seamy side of New York did not seem to hold much interest for him. The life of the middle and upper classes was not his milieu, and thus he feared that he might not find any suitable topics to write about in New York. As an outsider to the New York social, financial, and literary scenes (a world far better suited to Bisland), he was afraid that it might simply “wither him up” creatively. Fear of high society, indeed of most society in general, would certainly have made the prospect of trying to lead a literary life in New York City a nightmare indeed. He much preferred a place where he would not be forced to associate with people, especially a large group or network of them, except when he was in the mood — and even then, only for a period of some stimulating conversation with one or two congenial others.

Thus it was that he hit upon the idea of taking up residence in Philadelphia, a calmer, more user-friendly version of New York — or so he hoped. While in Martinique, he had struck up a lively and sympathetic correspondence with a young Philadelphia ophthalmologist, George Gould, and it was to him that Hearn inquired about a place to stay:

If you could find me in Philadelphia a very quiet room where I could write without noise for a few months. I would try my luck there. New York is stupefying; I know too many people there; and I want to be very quiet —only to see a friend or two now and then, when I am in good trim for a chat. I shall return to the West Indies in the winter. (XIV, 69. Saint-Pierre, Martinique 4/1889)

If we compare this with his letter to Tunison, Hearn seems to be contradicting himself. To Tunison he complained that in New York nobody could ever find anybody; people were prevented from meeting each other by mazes of granite walls. To Gould he fretted that in New York he had too many acquaintances, implying that he might be found too easily and be too pestered by social obligations to do literary work! In fact, both feelings were paradoxically true. Later he would express a similarly ambivalent attitude in Japan: In Kumamoto he was delighted to be the only foreigner at the university, but he was also extremely lonely and sometimes begged his friends in Tokyo to visit him there in his exile from the West. When he moved to Tokyo University, he was glad to be able to talk with a variety of foreign staff, but he was even gladder that the large size of the school made it possible to avoid having to talk to anyone for years, if he so desired. Hearn's remarks about cities in these letters, then, confirm the impression that throughout his life he was always striving to find a balance between two contradictory needs: (1) the need for companionship, sympathy, and intellectual stimulation, and (2) the need for privacy, isolation, and even loneliness without which he felt he could not write.

In Philadelphia, he seems to have achieved that balance, or at least freedom from the worry of how to maintain it, at the home of Dr. Gould, where he got a room, a companion, and privacy, and all right in the heart of town at 119 South 17th Street, just minutes on foot from the center of the city. Though he was there only a few months, or perhaps *because* he was there only a few months, Hearn fell in love with the city. He contrasted it with its larger rival, New York City, less than two hours by rail to the north, and found it much more suited to his needs. It was mostly to Bisland that he confessed the reasons for preferring the "City of Brotherly Love." First, it was much quieter than New York, not only in decibels but also in the less-frenzied pace of its daily life:

It is so quiet in this beautiful great city [Philadelphia], and my present environment is so pleasant, that I am sure of doing better work here than I could in that frightful cyclone of electricity and machinery called New York. . . . (XIV, 75-76. To Bisland, 1889)

Another reason he liked it was its old-fashioned sense of propriety and decorum, its stateliness of manner, which was reflected not only in the architecture and layout, but also in the provincial, conservative attitudes of the majority of its citizens. Its size and pace of life, too, were on a scale far more manageable to Hearn, and after New York, even its blandness was a relief:

Philadelphia is a city very peculiar —isolated by custom antique, but having a good solid social morality, and much peace. It has its own dry drab newspapers, which are not like any other newspapers in the world, and contain nothing not immediately concerning Philadelphia. Consequently no echo from New York enters here—nor any from anywhere else: there are no New York papers sold to speak of. The Quaker City does not want them—thinks them in bad taste, accepts only the magazines and weeklies. But it's the best old city in the whole world all the same. (XIV, 78. To Bisland, 1889)

Poking mild fun at Philadelphians' snobbish dismissal of other cities' news and newspapers for being vulgar, Hearn seems to have developed a genuine affection for Philadelphia, a seemingly greater one than he had felt for any other American city, including Cincinnati and New Orleans.

In addition to the above-mentioned reasons, Hearn's affection for Philadelphia was probably also due in part to the hospitality of the Goulds. He found Dr. Gould to be a stimulating and wonderfully enlightening conversation partner, with a fascinating, if not brilliant, literary mind along with his scientific one. And though Hearn enjoyed talking with him immensely, Dr. Gould was often quite busy in his clinic. This was another fortuitous circumstance since it allowed Hearn ample time to be alone for literary pursuits. In general, life was pleasant and comfortable in their large, well-situated

home.

Yet another factor that might have predisposed Hearn to liking Philadelphia was that he never had to spend a winter there; his five months of residence went from spring through summer, and his main impressions of the place were formed during the season of warm, sunny days, the kind he loved. Of these positive impressions, perhaps the most pleasant were those of leisurely hours spent in the extensive natural beauty of Fairmount Park. To Bisland in New York, he fairly crowed about it:

P.S. Oh! —you spoke about Philadelphia. . . . Is it possible you have never seen it? Is it possible you have never seen Fairmount Park? Believe me, then, that it is the most beautiful place of the whole civilized world on any sunny, tepid summer day. Your Central Park is a cabbage-garden by comparison. F. Pk. is fifteen miles long, by about eight or ten broad. But the size is nothing. It is the beauty of the woods and their vistas, the long drives by the river, the glimpse of statuary and fountains from delightful terraces, the knolls commanding the whole circle of the horizon, the vast garden and lawn spaces, the shadowed alleys where 100,000 people make scarcely any more sound than a swarm of bees—and over it all such a soft, sweet dreamy light. (When you go to see it, be sure to choose a sunny, *warm* day.) Thousands of thousands of carriages file by, each with a pair of lovers in it. Everybody in the park seems to be making love to somebody. Love is so much the atmosphere of the place—a part of the light and calm and perfume—that you feel as if drenched with it, permeated by it, mesmerized. And if you are all alone, you will look about you once in a while, wondering that somebody else is not beside you. . . . But I forgot that I am not writing to a stupid man, like myself. (XIV, 96-97)

What started off as a paean to a park has rather artfully developed into a thinly veiled confession of love, as plainly as he ever expressed it in writing. Hearn has virtually invited Elizabeth to come to Philadelphia to ride in a carriage in the love-suffused atmosphere of Fairmount Park, with him. His longing here for something more than sisterly love is almost palpable, and it is sad to imagine Hearn standing alone gazing with envy at couple after couple riding happily together through the woods. He seems to know well that he is indeed a “stupid man,” not only for being so nakedly romantic but also for wanting something he knows he cannot have.

Notice in his description of the park that Hearn is not simply in love with its vast unspoiled-ness or wildness. Rather he talks fondly of its human-oriented features, its manageability and accessibility: “long drives by the river” and vistas and terraces and knolls which command views containing delightful man-made touches such as statues and fountains and lawn spaces. It is nature, to be sure, but nature cultivated and civilized, domesticated, if you will, with roads and carriages and views, prepared and waiting for you to enjoy: an English garden writ large. “Blessed is savagery,” he once wrote, but also blessed was nature civilized in the tasteful, unobtrusive way that he found Fairmount Park to be in the summer of 1889.

After his first miserable years as an immigrant in New York City, Hearn left to try his luck in the thriving mid-western city of Cincinnati, Ohio, where he hoped to get help from a friend of his aunt. Though he eventually thrived there, finding work as a reporter, walking its streets and uncovering its darkest secrets for the Cincinnati *Commercial*, he spent surprisingly few words to express his opinion of it as a city and never expressed regret at leaving it. It was mostly “practical, pork-packing Cincinnati.”⁸ When his old friend Henry Watkin complained that business in Cincinnati was bad, Hearn in New Orleans tried to lure him down there for better financial prospects and a delicious proximity to the open seas:

Cincinnati is bad; but it's going to be a d__d sight worse. You know that as well as I do. Leave the vile hole and the long catalogue of Horrid Acquaintances behind you, and come down here to your own little man, —good little man. Get you nice room, nice board, nice business. Perhaps we might strike ile [oil] in a glorious spec. . . . This is a seaport. There are tall ships here. They sail to Europe, —to London, Marseilles, Constantinople, Smyrna. They sail to the West Indies and those seaports where we are going to open a cigar store or something of that kind.⁹

Watkin had mentioned the possibility of moving to Kansas, but Hearn, who was full of romantic dreams, strongly advised him against it: "Don't go to horrid, dreadful Kansas. Go to some outrageous, ruinous land, where the moons are ten times larger than they are there. Or tell me to pull up stakes, and I shall take unto myself the wings of a bird and fly to any place but beastly Cincinnati."¹⁰

With few exceptions Hearn became disillusioned with all of the sizeable cities he had lived in: New York, despite brief interludes of delight, remained in his memory as a "nightmare"; Cincinnati was, after all, a "vile hole." Even exotic New Orleans, "a land of magical moons and of witches and of warlocks," eventually disappointed him: "Everybody here is a thief," he wrote to Watkin, but it was not so much the morality that disillusioned him. Nor was it the poor economy: "The city is crumbling into ashes," he wrote to Krehbiel in 1880, "It has been buried under a lava-flood of taxes and frauds and maladministrations so that it has become only a study for archaeologists. . . . But it is better to live here in sackcloth and ashes, than to own the whole State of Ohio."¹¹ Rather it was the Poe-like sense in the air of death and decay, physical, mental, and moral, that weighed on him, the "heavy and murky atmosphere . . . incessant rain, sickening weight of foul air, and a sky as grey as the face of Melancholy." Everything was "half under water" and "mocassin snakes swarm in the old stonework of the gutters" and bite the children.

I am very weary of New Orleans. The first delightful impression it produced has vanished. The city of my dreams, bathed in the gold of eternal summer, and perfumed with the amorous odours of orange flowers, has vanished like one of those phantom cities of Spanish America, swallowed up centuries ago by earthquakes, but reappearing at long intervals to deluded travelers. What remains is something horrible like the tombs here — *material and moral rottenness which no pen can do justice to*. You must have read some of those mediaeval legends in which an amorous youth finds the beautiful witch he has embraced all through the night crumble into a mass of calcined bones and ashes in the morning. Well, I feel like such a one, and almost regret that, unlike the victims of those diabolical illusions, I do not find my hair whitened and my limbs withered by sudden age; *for I enjoy exuberant vitality and still seem to myself like one buried alive or left alone in some city cursed with desolation* like that described by Sinbad the Sailor. No literary circle here; no jovial coterie of journalists; no associates save those vampire ones of which the less said the better.¹² (my italics)

Yet despite these occasional feelings of overwhelming morbidity, he stayed in the city for another six years until June 1887. Death and decay he could take; cold he could not. "I don't think you will see me in New York this winter. I shudder at the bare idea of cold. . . . I would rather be whipped with scorpions than visit a Northern city in the winter months," he wrote to Krehbiel in September 1883 (XIII, 272-73). In another letter to Krehbiel written soon after, Hearn expanded on his increasingly contrastive feelings about New Orleans and New York:

New York has become something appalling to my imagination — perhaps because I have been drawing my ideas of it from caricatures: something cyclopean without solemnity, something pandemoniac without grotesqueness — preadamite bridges — superimpositions of iron roads higher than the aqueducts of the Romans — gloom, vapour, roarings and lightnings. When I think of it, I feel more content with my sunlit marshes — and the frogs — and the gnats — and the invisible plagues lurking in invisible vapours — and the ancientness — and the vast languor of the land. (XIII, 282)

Cyclops versus gnats; elevated rails of iron versus sunlit marshes. The adjectives he chose to describe New York — cyclopean, pandemoniac, preadamite — seldom appear elsewhere in his writing and convey a feeling of Miltonic hardness and classical antiquity. Through them Hearn wished to suggest that New York City was a modern reification of the grandeur and barbarity of ancient civilization. The linguistic formality of these polysyllabic adjectives conveys the same lack of intimacy as the place they describe. The simpler noun-laden style of his sentences about New Orleans could hardly be more contrastive. Notice, too, that the images of Basho's famous haiku poem on the ancient pond were already present in Hearn's mind in his combination of frogs, marshes, and ancientness. Perhaps Hearn was already showing an uncanny preference for the aesthetic values of Japanese civilization.

Again, Hearn says that he prefers languor to bustle, ease to effort, stagnant pools brimming with frogs and bugs and germs to lofty constructs of iron and stone, the simple and ancient to the complex and modern. But he also knew that what he sometimes needed to feel really alive was literary material and the energy to write it up. Though he boasted in the former letter that he was enjoying "exuberant vitality," he described himself in this letter almost as if he were someone drugged, unable to arouse himself from lethargy, dreaming of death and passing his days away in a torpor.

Even our vegetation here, funereally drooping in the great heat, seems to dream of dead things — to mourn for the death of Pan. After a few years here the spirit of the land has entered into you — and the languor of the place embraces you with an embrace that may not be broken; thoughts come slowly, ideas take form sluggishly as shapes of smoke in heavy air; and a great horror of work and activity and noise and bustle rots itself within your soul — I mean brain. Soul=Cerebral Activity=Soul. (XIII, 282)

His seeming endorsement here of a lethargic existence that slouches toward oblivion, decay, and death was perhaps exaggerated to amuse, if not shock, Krehbiel, but a life bathed in heat, away from the noise and stress of cities, surrounded by natural beauty, was never far from his mind. To Watkin he expressed his ideal place of residence this way:

Perhaps some day we can both take things more easily, and a long rest by running streams, near mountain winds and in a climate like unto an eternal mountain springtime. Dream of voices of birds, whisper of leaves, milky quivering of stars, laughing of streams, odors of pine and of savage flowers, shadows of flying clouds, winds triumphantly free. Horrible cities! Vile air! Abominable noises! Sickness! Humdrum human machines! Let us strike our tents! Move a little nearer to Nature. (*Letters from The Raven*, p.79)

New Orleans, despite its soothing heat, proximity to nature, and promise to become "healthier and more beautiful year by year,"¹³ was still a city foul of air, noisy, and rife with diseases such as dengue fever, which Hearn had barely recovered from. Large, cold, and highly civilized cities were even worse. Life in Martinique was as close as he had so far been able to come to his ideal dwelling place, and Hearn felt that it had spoiled him for anything like a permanent return to life in urban America. In a letter to Gould from Martinique he gave perhaps the clearest expression of his feelings about city life culminated from nearly twenty years' experience:

It appears to me impossible to resign myself to living again in a great city and in a cold climate . . . I am apt to tire of places — or at least of the disagreeable facts attaching more or less to all places and becoming more and more marked and unendurable the longer one stays . . . perhaps you will not comprehend that one can actually become weary of a whole system of life, of civilization, even with very limited experience. Such is exactly my present feeling — an unutterable weariness of the aggressive characteristics of existence in a highly organized society. The higher the social development, the sharper the struggle. One feels this especially in America — in the nervous centres of the world's activity. One feels it least, I imagine, in the tropics, where it is such an effort just to live, that one has no force left for the effort to expand one's own individuality at the cost of another's. (XIV, 49-50)

Cities, he felt, especially large American ones, demanded a life of incessant competition, a struggle against one's fellows for success and self-promotion, and he began to feel that it was simply not his nature to be that aggressive. In the tropics it was too hot and peaceful to compete; it was the perfect place for someone like Hearn who was weary of the social and economic struggle at the core of a rapidly developing capitalistic society. Just out of those tropics, now in Metuchen, New Jersey, he was convinced he had been cast out of Eden. To Watkin he made one final plea to live with him in the Antilles: "All dreams of Paradise (even Mahomet's) are more than realized there by nature; — after returning, I find this world all colorless, all grey, and fearfully cold. I feel like an outcast from heaven."¹⁴ At the same time, however, it was also too hot to work in the tropics, and this, too, was something Hearn wearied of over time, for it was also his nature to crave mental stimulation, to need to think and write books. So he fought his own contradictory feelings,

moving from place to place, continually in search of an ideal environment: someplace with the heat and natural beauty of the South but without the physical and mental enervation that so often accompanied it.

By the time he was ready to leave the United States, Hearn's preferences were narrowing down: South over North, Rural over Urban, Nature over Civilization. Sometimes he seemed to think that civilization itself was the problem, and that if he could only escape it, he could be happy: "What would be nice," he confided to Bisland in 1887, "if one could manage it, would be to live in the country, or in some vast wilderness, and ship one's work away" (XIV, 28). In a sense, his approaching removal to the cultural remoteness of Japan, far from the centers of American civilization, contained the essence of that wish. But whatever he imagined Japan would be like, when he arrived on its exotic shores he found the question of cities and where to live as problematical as ever.

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